

Story of cities: *The The Four Books on
Architecture* by Andrea Palladio, his drawings
and text on Maison Carrée

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Abstract

An investigation of how his drawings and text work in concert as an integrated composition to express his theories on design and production.

Andrea Palladio, whose life span encompassed the years 1518-1580, was fortunately born in an age influenced by a restless desire to continue the work of the Italian Renaissance, one of the most gifted, professional, and intelligent of architects, published in Venice in 1570 a treatise entitled *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (The Four Books of Architecture) in four volumes. Even though Palladio was once a youthful sculptor at Vicenza, he soon possessed a great love and natural inclination for architecture and was working on the treatise for an extended number of years. Hence his life and work deserve close study, not only for understanding the history of architecture in the past but also to support the fact that there is such a thing as a standard in architectural design. It is not to be overlooked that within his limits, each illustration in his work is not only an explanation for an architectural feature mentioned in the text but also an independent visual message. Both enable the student to find in the past his guide for the future.

The didactic function of Palladio's books is constantly seen throughout his work. I would endeavor to trace this function before it is forever forgotten by deriving its value from a specific Roman temple dating from antiquity in the fourth book, Maison Carrée at Nîmes south of France, the best-preserved Roman temple in existence. Palladio's typical studies are apparent in this temple, in which he gives a plan, section, and elevations along with his referrals to the remarks and instructions of Vitruvius.

Palladio studied characteristic elements of classical architecture with carefully controlled details with intense attention. The quadrangular form of Maison Carrée seems to suggest that "it was a Basilica or court of Justice." (Palladio, p. 11) However, after long periods of experimentation, "because their form was high," (Palladio, p. 11) he believes "this lower edifice to have been a Temple." (Palladio, p. 11) Palladio does not need to be a geometer to realize that "the floor of this Temple is elevated, but only a sensible, temperate man of affairs, perhaps, would mark the division between a Basilica and a Temple by a couple

of foot high. This difference in the high of the floor serves no structural purpose but it sorts out the types of the building for students to grasp.

The impact of Palladio's restoration drawings has been proved to be profound by the best-preserved Roman temple in existence, Maison Carrée. This suggests that his work is a credible and captivating image of ancient Classical architecture which was subsequently destroyed. The only doubt is whether his restoration drawings are a copy of a survey conducted by himself, or rather his copy of another architect's drawing. But there is no doubt that the temple itself as well as Palladio's restoration drawings of the temple both reflect the teachings of Vitruvius. Palladio took care to represent the relation which according to Vitruvius binds the arrangements of the colonnades of the pseudo-peripteral temple. The difficulties arise, however, when it comes to the base of the columns. Palladio commented that "the base of the columns is Attick, but has moreover some Astragals, whence it may be call'd Composite, and agreeable to the Corinthian order." (Palladio, p. 11)

References

- [1] Palladio, Andrea. *The Four Books of Architecture, vol. 4, Book the Fourth*. Translated by Giacomo Leoni. London: John Watts, 1715-1720.